



BEYOND REALISM: WERNER HERZOG'S QUEST FOR THE TRUTH

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ABSTRACT

The theme of Werner Herzog's quest for the deeper truth is the basis of my paper. Here I have used all forms of his films, books and interviews to track the trajectory of this quest. The quest is inscribed in his own manifesto which he unfurled as the Minnesota Declaration in 1999. Herzog's philosophy behind his quest for the deeper truth is summed up in this declaration. The declaration is an attack on the philosophy of Cinéma Vérité which he says is devoid of vérité. This is a direct attack on an established belief and movement. Herzog's contention is that this truth is a superficial one. For him the deeper truth lies beyond the facts. For him 'facts create norms' and 'truth illuminates'. One particular book I have put under the lens is his book *Of Walking in Ice* (1980). Here also Herzog experiments with the diary form to dig his idea of the deeper truth. Here I have also given a brief discussion on the evolving ideas of realism and its relationship with documentary. And from there I move on to how Herzog plays with the idea of realism to critique the idea of realism itself. I have also introduced here Herzog's philosophy of learning and his unflinching stand against academia. For Herzog academia is the death of cinema.

KEYWORDS: Realism, Truth, Films, Documentary, Cinéma Vérité, Diary

INTRODUCTION

The term "realism" originates from the term "real" which means actually existing or present. And the idea of cinematic realism has been a subject of much debate among ever since the birth of cinema. Rudolph Arnheim in his book, *Film as Art* (1933) wrote that the technical development of the motion picture will soon carry the mechanical imitation of nature to the extreme. But Rudolph's contention is that with the emergence of every new technological improvement the artistic potentialities of the film also decreases. Arnheim says this catastrophe can only be avoided of the silent film, sound film, coloured film and any other film with a technological advancement is allowed to co-exist. Siegfried Kracauer in his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) lays down his belief that films follows realist tendency which is ahead of photography in two respects. First is the movement of the static images and secondly films by means of staging is able to create a reproduction of the real one and hence conveying a sense of actuality in the mind of the spectator. André Bazin is another thinker who propounded the idea of films as possessing a unique realism. In his article "The Ontological Realism of the Photographic Image" (1945), Bazin says that the growth of cinema and the technological advancements seen is nothing but mankind's urge to reach out for that perfect representation of the real. For Bazin the mechanical production of reality through photography and cinema produces not a likeness as in painting but the exact image of the object itself.

Gerald Mast, Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen in the book *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (1999) commenting on the difference between Kracauer and Bazin says, Unlike Kracauer, Bazin views the film's realism as an expression of the mythic, not the scientific, spirit and believes

that its function is not to redeem physical reality but to exempt our physical reality. The magical aim finds expression in the "myth of total cinema," the ideal of a complete recreation of the world in its own image." (5) But Braudy and Cohen marks out Arnheim as leading the first generation of the anti-realist tradition. I would disagree with this because Arnheim was not against the technological advancements but rather pointing out to the immense artistic potentialities of each stage which would be missed out if that stage vanishes. For instance the artistic potentials of the silent film or the black and white film remained much unattained with the coming of sound and colours in the films.

V.F Perkins' book *Film as Film* (1972) deals with the idea of form in cinema. He says that since the beginning of films there has been two strands of thoughts. One was the urge to capture the real world by its appearance and the other by the imagination of the film-maker. The first strand is followed by the documentary film-makers and aims at minimum intervention and objectivity whereas the second strand is followed by those who imposes their subjectivity and artistic interventions to bring to life a vision without worrying about adhering to realistic appearances. But this binary division of form is dissolved by Herzog who says, "I have never made a distinction between my feature films and my 'documentaries'." (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 95).

The term "realism" originates from the term "real" which means actually existing or present. And the term "documentary" emerges from the word "Document" which originates from the Latin word "documentum" which means an official paper or evidence. Thus the two words "realism" and "documentary" are closely connected as both implies to the idea of actually existing and not an imagination or invention. Herzog problematises

the notion of reality by blurring the boundary between reality and invention. In the realm of films, the term “documentary” was first introduced by John Grierson in his review of Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana* (1926). Carl Plantinga in his essay, “Documentary” analyses how this idea further developed in the 1930s. Plantinga writes, “The word regularly appeared in English by the 1930s by which time it designated a “higher” order of nonfiction film”. Plantinga further elaborates saying, “Grierson established the tradition by elevating the documentary to a status above the broad category of nonfiction films, based on the documentarian’s “creative shapings” of “natural material.” Thus despite the fact that “documentary” seems to imply a film that is merely or primarily a “document”, Grierson held that it is in fact an art form rather than the mechanical documentation of some form of reality.” (495)

The arguments have continued with continued with different theorists taking different stance. But whether one says all films are fictions or films are documentaries, the arguments have unearthed a rich fodder for the further analysis of films. Take for instance, Gregory Currie’s “documentary-as-trace” idea. Elucidating on this idea Plantinga in his essay, “Documentary”, writes, “To understand Currie’s theory one must first understand his notion of the photograph as a “trace” and how traces differ from “testimonies”. Both testimonies and traces are signs of communications that carry Information. A testimony is the record of what someone thought about something; testimonies are belief dependent. Traces, by contrast are records that are, to some extent, independent of belief. Photographs are traces, Currie claims, because they are independent of belief in a way that paintings (and other testimonies) are not. Documentary films, Currie claims, are predominantly made up of traces.” (497) This idea of Currie is much problematised by Herzog’s film, *Grizzly Man* (2005), which is a documentary film on the life of Timothy Treadwell who went to Alaska and stayed amidst the wild bears. Timothy’s mission is to bring a better understanding of wild bears and to prove how he or we could co-exist with the bears. Timothy dies a tragic but ironic death; he is killed by one of the very bears he is fighting for. Herzog in the film shows a number of testimonies, ranging from those who stood for him and his mission as well as those who condemned him for as acts as saying that Timothy crossed the boundary which he should never have tried; that of trying to co-exist with the wild bears. Now, if we go by Currie’s idea of documentary as traces, then it implodes in *Grizzly Man*, as the very traces are mostly made of testimonies only.

Grierson’s definition of documentary as “creative treatment of actuality” is enhanced by inventions in Herzog’s form of documentary. Herzog lays down his philosophy of cinema in his Minnesota Declaration.

The Minnesota Declaration

Truth and fact in documentary cinema

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota April 30, 1999

Werner Herzog

LESSONS OF DARKNESS

devoid of verite. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants.

2. One well-known representative of Cinéma Vérité declared publicly that truth can be easily found by taking a camera and trying to be honest. He resembles the night watchman at the Supreme Court who resents the amount of written law and legal procedures. ‘For me,’ he says, ‘there should be only one single law: the bad guys should go to jail.’ Unfortunately, he is part right, for most of the many, much of the time.
3. Cinéma vérité confounds fact and truth, and thus plows only stones. And yet, facts sometimes have a strange and bizarre power that makes their inherent truth seem unbelievable.
4. Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.
5. There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.
6. Filmmakers of Cinéma Vérité resemble tourists who take pictures amid ancient ruins of facts.
7. Tourism is sin, and travel on foot virtue.
8. Each year at springtime scores of people on snowmobiles crash through the melting ice on the lakes of Minnesota and drown. Pressure is mounting on the new governor to pass a protective law. He, the former wrestler and bodyguard, has the only sage answer to this: ‘You can’t legislate stupidity.’
9. The gauntlet is hereby thrown down.
10. The moon is dull. Mother Nature doesn’t call, doesn’t speak to you, although a glacier eventually farts. And don’t you listen to the Song of Life.

Herzog follows much of the methods of Cinéma Vérité like filming with a light crew on location. And like the Cinéma Vérité tradition Herzog too is strictly against the idea of shooting in studios. For instance *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) was shot completely on location in the Peruvian rainforest on the Amazon river. The cast and crew had to traverse through treacherous terrains and face enormous difficulties during the whole period. Herzog’s departure from the Cinéma Vérité tradition lies in his idea of truth. He says that the truth which you shoot without the enhancement of the reality is but a superficial truth. His idea is that the illuminating truth or the ecstatic truth can be reached only by fabrication, imagination and stylization.

Herzog refuses to get trapped in the binary division of whether he is a realist filmmaker or not. His aim is to go beyond realism to reach out to a deeper truth. Facts he says needs to be enhanced to reach that deeper truth. Herzog’s dragging up of the boat up a real mountain instead of doing it in the cosy confine of a studio should not be interpreted as an exercise in extreme realism. For Herzog it was much beyond, it was about making the film write its own script. Summing up his idea of shooting in studios, Herzog says, “For my entire career as a director I have avoided filming in studios, something I feel kills the spontaneity that is so necessary for the kind of cinema I want to create.” (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 103)

1. By dint of declaration the so-called Cinéma Vérité is

Herzog’s idea of a film school is his stand against established

ideas of learning. For Herzog life is the best school of learning. And he practiced what he preached. Herzog never went to a film school nor worked as an assistant under a filmmaker. Herzog's idea of eligibility to his ideal film school was that the applicant must have traveled alone on foot for 5,000 kilometres. And write while he is walking. He sums it up by saying, "During your voyage you will learn more about what your future holds than in five years at film school. Your experiences would be the very opposite of academic knowledge, for academia is the death of cinema. It is the very opposite of passion." (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 15) This idea of walking as the best way to learn is part of his declared manifesto.

Herzog's approach to his film-making is an instinctive one and not one planned out in a story-board. He allows the scenes to develop on its and set his camera angles accordingly as his instincts drive him. His belief is that the film should develop organically. Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) is one such film where he exercises his instincts to let the film take its own shape. The plot of the film revolves around the story of Lope de Aguirre a Spanish adventure, who embarked on a search for El Dorado. He called himself 'wrath of God' and declared himself the emperor of El Dorado and the new king of Spain. Based on a few documents he managed to salvage Herzog weaved the script of the film. To bring in the air of authenticity Herzog invents a monk who kept a diary in the expedition. As Herzog says :

The entire script is pure invention, the voice-over is a fabricated diary of the monk on the voyage, even though a monk with the same name did exist and wrote a diary of a totally different expedition. Historians are always asking me where I got the documents, and I keep saying that it was in this and that book but regrettably I cannot remember the title. (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 78)

Herzog says that the dangers that one sees in a Hollywood movie cannot really move the audience as his films do. As in *Aguirre*, the spectators too "feel the authenticity of the situations the actors are in." And not just the dangers but the sheer beauty of the authentic landscapes allow for the audience to experience a sheer exhilarating pleasure. For instance the spectacular opening scene where we see the soldiers slowly walking on the side of a mountain was shot at a location which had a vertical drop of 600 metres. The soldiers following the trail and slowly emerging out of the clouds is seen as one of the best landscape shots ever. Commenting on shooting in jungles Herzog also says, "As a Bavarian I have an affinity for the fertility of the jungle, the fever dreams and the physical exuberance of things down there. For me, jungles have always represented something of an intensified form of reality," (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 87)

Herzog's dragging of the steamer up a mountain in his film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) also brings into focus Herzog's idea of truthfulness in the portrayal. His belief is that only in the authenticity of the scene the audience is moved. The audience was able to appreciate the dragging of the steamer up the mountain speaks volumes of Herzog's faith in the audience.

Grizzly Man (2005) is important in terms of the construction of the film because the bulk of Herzog's footages are not his own recordings but Timothy's self made footages. Herzog's half the story in the film is created through the editing and his own narrating of these footages. Here the issue of authorship arises. But how do we interpret Herzog's role? He is the director who is editing and interpreting Timothy Treadwell's interpretation. Since the process of filming is also editing in process Herzog is editing Treadwell's edited work. Herzog exercises his authorial intention quite clearly in the film with his narration. Herzog shows Treadwell's worldview in the film and then imposes his philosophy. Treadwell proclaims himself the protector the bears but Herzog thinks otherwise. Herzog imposes his idea of nature as a beautiful yet ruthless force in the film. Herzog pronounces his judgment saying Treadwell died because he crossed a boundary he should never have crossed.

Herzog in the film *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) starts with a quote from Blaise Pascal, 'The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like creation-in grandiose splendour.' But this is also a fabricated quote. What Herzog is trying to say through this fabrication is that his film is a story and he a storyteller and not documentary filmmaker as perceived in the conventional sense.

Herzog also says that not just fabrication, it is stylization also which adds to the discovery of a deeper level of truth. But the stylization of truth in the documentary films, he says is tough to detect as it is done in a very subtle way. In *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), Dieter Dengler the actor plays himself in the documentary. Herzog says everything in the film is the authentic Dieter Dengler but the film was all re-orchestrated, scripted and rehearsed to intensify his projection of himself.

Herzog's quest for the deeper truth is not restricted to his films alone. His book, *Of Walking in Ice* (1980) also deals with this quest. The book which stands as a symbol of what Lotte H. Eisner stood for is Herzog's diary of his walk from Munich to Paris at the end of November, 1974. In the Forward to the book, Herzog writes, "I set off on the most direct route to Paris, in full faith, believing that she would stay alive if I came on foot." Herzog's belief is that he through the process of his walk stopping Eisner from dying. The walk is like a pilgrimage to a holy place, only here there is no shrine but a dying Eisner. For Herzog and the New German Cinema, Eisner was the light that shone on them. Eisner's seminal works on the works of earlier great German film makers like Fritz Lang and Murnau was the beacon for the young directors of the New German Cinema. It was Eisner only who first saw and stated the genius of Herzog, Fassbinder and Wenders. Herzog much like the solitary characters in his films plows on, no matter what. Commenting on Herzog's walk to save Lotte Eisner, Horak in his essay "W.H. or the Mysteries of Walking in Ice" says, "Herzog, like Christ in the desert, must endure loneliness and despair as spiritual cleansing, allowing him to experience visions more clearly. And like Christ, he takes on the pain and suffering of the world, in order that Lotte Eisner may live. (33)

Yet once again in this book, *Walking in Ice* (1980), one kind

of starts wondering at where does fact ends and invention begins. Herzog might have walked, but very walk becomes the enactment of a script, wherein Herzog is the director as well as the actor. Much like his stealing of the camera, the walk also fed into the constructed myth. The page of the book, *Walking in Ice*, or the diary unfolds much like the unfolding of a film. The sentences are a series of shots taken with a camera with Herzog himself as the narrator of the story. Like a dream the images move on, "In a rain-sodden field a man catches a woman.", "A near accident a bit further ahead.", "Soccer games are starting, they are chalking the centre line on the plowed fields." (8) Commenting on these images in the book, Horak in his essay "W.H. or the Mysteries of Walking in Ice" says, "Although the actual geographical area Herzog traverses is possibly one of the most densely populated and highly industrialized in Europe, he seldom comes into contact with people." (32) One more we are led to wonder whether the images of Herzog in the book are images of the world that inhabits his inner landscape. Horak is clear cut in his opinion in this regard:

Clearly, Herzog's diary is far from a documentary description of an observed reality. Just as in his non-fiction films seldom adhere to the "objectifying" conventions of documentary film practice, so too is his diary a subjective depiction of both factual and fictional events in which Herzog as the narrator and her is allowed to play central character. (36)

Landscapes play a crucial role in Herzog's quest for the truth. For Herzog the landscapes of the physical world are a mirror to the inner landscapes of our minds. As he says, "I try to find in my films, the landscapes that exist only in our dreams. For me a true landscape is not just a representation of a desert or a forest. It shows an inner state of mind, literally inner landscapes, and it is the human soul that is visible through the landscapes presented in my films, be it the jungle in *Aguirre*, the desert in *Fata Morgana*, or the burning oil fields of Kuwait in *Lessons of Darkness*." (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 136) And in invoking the physical landscapes Herzog is able to invoke his inner landscape. And through the films Herzog tugs at the inner recesses of the minds of the audience. This is the reason why Herzog's movies manage to incite a range of experiences and reactions from the audiences. Herzog is scathing in his view about the use of landscapes in Hollywood where he says they are merely picturesque or scenic backdrops. The jungle for Herzog reflects our deepest dreams, emotions and fears. It is not theatrics when he says he likes to direct landscapes. As, he says, "I like to direct landscapes just as I like to direct actors and animals. People think I am joking, but it is true. Often I try to introduce into a landscape a certain atmosphere, using sound and

vision to give it a definite character." (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 81) This use of landscapes in his direction is also a part of the German romanticism.

Herzog's quest of for the truth is given a different spin in Horak's article, "W.H. or the mysteries of walking in ice". Horak says that Herzog like an artist of romanticism seems to believe in the

true aesthetic vision, in the ability of the artist to create objects that would shake up the audience through the very uniqueness of the work. Herzog is trying to bring the auratically unique image in his films. Horak also says that in keeping with the romantic ideals, Herzog is consciously cultivating the idea that the qualities of the aesthetic object should be one with the creator of the work. Herzog's contention against Horak is that Herzog in his pursuit of the auratically unique image has elevated himself to a plane where he believes pain and suffering are a must to attain these goals. And this has resulted harm not just to Herzog himself but also to the people working alongside him.

Herzog finds a reflection of his quest in the efforts of mountain climber Reinhold Messner. Herzog interest was not in the intricacies of the mountain climbing but rather in the inner landscape of the climbers who sets out on such a treacherous task. The result of this fascination of Herzog is *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (1984). The film is about the attempt by Reinhold Messner nad his fellow mountaineer to climb two of the world's tallest peaks in succession without returning to the camp in between.

Herzog's *Fata Morgana* (1970) is about capturing that elusive vision that is beyond the physical realms. 'Fata morgana' means mirage and the mirage is the vision that Herzog sets out to capture through the camera. For Herzog the mirages are like the hallucinations of the inner landscape. Herzog is capturing the pictures of the inner landscape through the mirage of the physical landscape. The landscape of the desert also invokes another awakening in him:

But you know, there is something very primordial and mysterious and sensuous about the desert. It is not just a landscape; it is a way of life. The solitude is the most overwhelming thing; here is a hushed quality to everything. My time in the desert is part of a quest that has not yet ended for me, and even though we were in a car, the spirit of our journey was like one made on foot. (Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* 50)

For Herzog it is like the landscape of the desert mirroring the landscape of his soul. But the inner landscape of the soul is also littered with the remains of the material world and horror of violence. Amos Vogel, in his essay, "On Seeing a Mirage" gives a very lucid analysis of the film. Vogel says, "The land, though Africa, is an archetypical landscape of the mind. The inhuman grandeur of primeval dunes and horizons reveals man's triumphant and empty rape of nature." (45) further on Vogel says, "Fata Morgana emerges as a sardonic comment on technology, sentimentality, despoliation of land and people, projected by a suffering visionary tremblingly aware of our limited possibilities, outrageous perseverance, and almost bearable ridiculousness." (46)

Herzog continues making documentary films and continues to question us and pushes us to free ourselves from our self-made cages of conventions.

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FILMOGRAPHY

Aguirre, the Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Feature, 93 minutes, 35 mm, colour

Producer: Werner Herzog, Munich/Hessischer Rundfunk, Frankfurt, 1972

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Sound Engineer: Werner Herzog

Director of Photography: Thomas mauch with Francisco Joan and Orlando Macchiavello

Music: Florian Fricke (Popol Vuh)

Cast: Klaus Kinski, Helana rojo, Del Negro Ruy Guerra, Peter Berling, Cecilia Rivera, Daniel Ades, Edward Roland, Armando Polanah, Daniel Farfan, Alejandro Chavez, Antonio Marquez, Julio Martinez, Alejzndro Repulles, Indianer de Kooperative Laumarca

Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Synopsis: Spanish conquistadores in search of the legendary El Dorado. A whole army disappears into the jungle without a trace. A story of power and madness.

Fitzcarraldo

Feature, 137 minutes, 35 mm, colour

Producer: Werner Herzog and Lucki Stipitic, 1982

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Sound Engineer: Juarez Dagcberto, Zeze d'Alice

Director of Photography: Thomas mausch, Rainer klausmann

Music: Popul Vuh, Guiseppe Verdi, Vincenzo Bellini, Richard Strauss, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Jules Massenet

Principal cast: Klaus Kinski, Claudia Cardinale, Jose Lewgoy, Miguel Angel Fuentes, paul Hittscher, Huerequeque Enrique Bohoruez, Grande Othelo, Peter Berling, David Perez Espinoza, Milton Nascimento, Rui Polanah, Salvador, Godinez, dieter

milz, Bill Rose, Leoncio Bueno

Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Project Film production, Filmverlag Der Autoren, Munich, ZDF television, and Wildlife Films, Peru, S.A..

Synopsis: A film about a man's quest to build an opera house in the Amazon.

Grizzly Man

Documentary, 104 minutes

Producer: Erik Nelson, 2005

Editor: Joe Bini

Sound Engineer: Spence Palermo Ken King

Director of Photography: Peter Zeitlinger

Music: Richard Thompson

Cast: Timothy Tradwell

Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Synopsis: A film on the life and death of Timothy Treadwell who lived amongst the wild bears for many seasons believing himself to be their protector.

Lessons of Darkness (Lektionen in Finsternis)

Documentary, 52 minutes, Super 16, colour

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Producer: Lucki Stipetic, 1992

Director of Photography: Paul Berriff

Editor: Rainer Standke

Sound Engineer: John G. Pearson

Music: Wagner, Grieg, Prokofiev, Part, Verdi, Schubert, Mahler

Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Paul Berriff, Premiere Hamburg

Synopsis: An apocalyptic vision featuring the oilwell fires in Kuwait after the Gulf-War, as a whole world burst into flames. This film is stylized as science fiction, as there is not a single shot in which you can recognize our planet

The Dark Glow of the Mountains (Gasherbrum – der leuchtende Berg)

Documentary, 45 minutes, 16 mm, colour

Producer: Werner Herzog, Munich, 1984

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Editor: Maximiliane Mainka

Sound Engineer: Christine Ebenberger

Director of Photography: Rainer Klausmann, Jorge Vignati

Music: Popul Vuh, Florian Fricke, Renate Knaup, Daniel Fischelscher

Cast: Reinhold Messner, Hans Kammerlander

Production Company: Werner Herzog Filmproduktion

Synopsis: In the summer of 1984, famous mountain climber Reinhold Messner climbed two of the highest peaks in the world back to back. A film about stark and austere inner landscapes, and what compels these climbers.